The Fourth Church Pulpit

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD

December 4, 1994

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.'" Luke 2:10 (NRSV)

I have seen several angels recently. In fact, ever since Rachel Diane, a new granddaughter, arrived on Tuesday morning I've been holding a little angel in my arms all week. Last summer I finally saw, personally, an angel I have been admiring in countless reproductions, reading about in essays and articles, and if truth be known an angel I keep, on a postcard, as a book mark in my Bible. It is Gabriel, at the moment of annunciation:

> "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."

It is one of the most mysteriously intriguing moments in the Bible, when a little Jewish girl understands something at least of what it will mean to be the mother of Jesus. Artists, particularly in the Middle Ages, the age of faith and mystery, were obsessed by that moment and painted it thousands and thousands of times.

Finally I saw her ... the angel on the postcard I keep in my Bible. It is a fresco in the monastery of San Marcos in Florence. It is not easy to find, and in Florence with its treasure of art, the monastery of San Marcos is not on many tourist itineraries. But we went, walking what seemed like a long time in the rain, and finally I saw her. Fra Angelica was the artist. He decorated the monastery for the monks in the 15th century, gorgeously, even the walls of their cells, a gift of beauty, a compensation perhaps for their poverty and celibacy. The fresco in question is at the head of a stairway. If you were a monk in the 15th century you would see this moment, this angel every day, every night before you went to bed. It is a big fresco, maybe four feet by eight feet. The colors are exquisite, pastels, pinks and blues. The angel and Mary are quite young. They incline serenely toward each other. Their bodies make a kind of arch, pointing up to heaven.

It is not only the beauty of this art. It is the moment and what it means. It is God telling a human being, in this case a young girl, that what is about to happen to her has holiness about it; that her routine pregnancy which, in her circumstance, could be construed as an utter and absolute disaster, is actually the very event by which God intends to reveal the nature of love, the highest and holiest hope for all people. It is God performing a miracle of transformation, and transforming what looks like a tragedy into the very event which will forever define love and grace and hope. The compelling thing about this and every picture of that moment and that angel is the reminder that ordinary events and ordinary people are the places where God comes into life, a reminder that the angel is the person who points to that miracle.

Rome and Florence are filled with angels. In the Church of Saint John of Lateran, Bernini covered the ceiling with carved stone medallions, bearing the faces of angels, fat cherubs. We found one and admired her for a long time until our necks hurt. We concluded she looked just like our granddaughter, Carolyn, who is a reminder to us of the holy, and love and hope and grace.

I've also seen local angels. One that I missed before, until Micah Marty pointed her out to me, is on our ceiling, directly over the chancel carved in stone, 80 feet in the air, looking straight down, holding a book, taking notes perhaps, observing with serenity the worship activities below, the choir, organ, clergy. In order to allow the workers to clean and restore the chancel vault and that angel, that part of the scaffolding was almost like a discrete attic room. I returned several times to see that angel, to touch her face, to remember that we do not go unobserved down here.

And of course, our sanctuary angels. They are larger than life and rather rough hewn actually. They seem to be looking at one another, and a good thing, because they play music together. The scaffold stairway ascended directly beside one. You could reach and touch him. Once, one of the angels wore a hard hat and a dust mask placed there by a worker with a divine sense of humor.

There are actually a lot of angels in the Bible. The definition of an angel is simply "a messenger from God." Sometimes angels seem to be heavenly beings. Mostly, however, angels appear to be people. Or — put the other way — perhaps people become angels. Sometimes angels in the Bible intercede to help people. Mostly, however, their function is to point to God, to remind otherwise busily, preoccupied people that holiness is in their midst, that what is about to transpire is divine.

The theologians, while being careful to distance themselves from the winged apparitions of medieval art, or worse, the sentimental cute angels of Christmas cards, nevertheless pay a lot of attention to the idea of angels as messengers from God, whose primary function is to point, like theologians, to remind finite human beings that they are living in the presence of infinity.

Karl Barth in his mammoth 12 volume *Church Dogmatics,* wrote 160 pages about angels and said,

> "At bottom a piety or theology in which there is no mystery, which lacks the mirror of self-representing deity, in which there are therefore, no angels, will surely be a godless theology." [*Theology Today,* 10/94, p. 351]

Barth's favorite angel was painted by Fritz Pauli in the Sixteenth Century. In it an "imposing angel stands on the ground pointing to the new born Jesus." [*Ibid.*]

One of the curious phenomena currently happening is a popular obsession with angels. There were major features in the *New York Times, Newsweek,* and *Time* magazine this year. A book about angels made it onto the bestseller list and the museum shops have trouble keeping up with the demand for angel posters, pins, reproductions, statuary, stationery and literature. A bestselling t-shirt displays Raphael's chubby, contented cherubs, looking slightly bored — like thirteen-year-olds during a lengthy and turgid sermon.

The *Chicago Tribune* ran an editorial on angels last September, and noted that Raphael is the hottest "new" artist around because of those angels and then posed the inevitable question. "Why?" Why indeed, in an age which on the one hand is almost defiantly secular, are people suddenly interested in angels?

The paper suggested that

> "in a sectarian age when people are being slaughtered and persecuted for their differences, angels are non-sectarian well wishers —universal exemplars of grace and innocence."

Or, may I suggest — our fundamental need as human beings, what we most need to make us human is some sense of the eternal, some sense that what appears to be a godless, secular world is in fact a world so dearly loved by God that God keeps blessing it with acts of grace and compassion and hope? It's not just sentiment. It is that we are hungry and thirsty for God.

Good writers know that. Even when they do not believe much, they know about the basic human need St. Augustine described as restlessness.

> "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee," he said.

John Irving's bestseller, *A Prayer For Owen Meany,* is about a curious little boy with a peculiar voice who somehow sees the significance of events; keeps pointing to the deeper meaning of ordinary happenings and himself becomes the expression of divine, sacrificial love.

John Updike in a poem, *The Angels,* suggests that composers and artists and writers are our angels.

> "The good gentlemen, Mozart and Bach,
> Scarlatti and Handel and Brahms.
> They are around us everywhere
> Matisse and Vermeer, Cezanne and Piero.
> Behind us, beneath us,
> Shakespeare and Tolstoy
> the Bible and Proust and Cervantes.
> They are above us all the time
> lavishing six measures of light down upon us.
> telling us over and over there is a
> realm above this plane of silent compromise."
>
> [*Collected Poems,* 1953-1993, p. 58]

The way the Bible describes them, sometimes angels startle and frighten those who witness them. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel said. "Don't be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people," the angel told the shepherds. But more often than not, angels pretty much look like other people. Or, perhaps, ordinary people have a way of becoming angels, when they remind us by what they say or do — that "there is a realm above us," that we live always in the presence of God.

Perhaps the person who at the birth of a child is able to gather up all the emotion and near trauma and fear and anxiety and joy and point to the holiness of it all — perhaps that person is an angel.

And when we are frightened: when we don't know what to do or where to turn: when we feel abandoned and alone and without resources, perhaps the person who steps in and holds us or simply holds our hand, or finds some way to console and calm and reassure — perhaps that person is an angel of God.

And at death, when someone with quiet grace, penetrates the gloom of grief with steady love and says to us, in some small way, what the angel said to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, early in the morning of the first day of that week, "Do not be afraid, he is not here: he has been raised." Perhaps the person who in some way enables us to hear those words through our tears, is God's angel.

Eugene Peterson wrote an essay on angels recently, *Witnesses To Transcendence.*

> "Transcendence cannot be forced upon us," he wrote. "It doesn't yell, doesn't announce its presence with a bull horn ...
>
> "What it requires is noticing. We miss a lot. We need friends who will grab us by the shirttail, turn us around and show us what we just missed in our running to get across the street on our way to the bank. We need friends who will tap us on the shoulder, interrupting our non-stop commentary on the talk of the town so that we can hear the truth."
> [*Theology Today,* 10/94, p. 395]

Angels — God's messengers — come quietly and unexpectedly. Angels, I think, don't always know they are being angels. That's the way it is, I believe. God uses people. It's God's project, not ours. And I do believe God has a way of using the small, the weak, the quiet, the little ones ... a new born infant, every time it happens, each one uniquely different, each one a messenger from the God of infinite love, to those who need to be reminded, which means every one of us, to hear and to know again about the love that never lets us go.

One time they sang at the birth of a baby and, as the historian noted, nothing has even been quite the same since.

It is Advent, the season of preparation.

Watch for them.

Listen for them.

Angels we hear on high.